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ABSTRACT

A suicide intervention training program is described which was developed as a three and one half hour presentation to small groups of paraprofessionals or professionals who might serve as telephone hot-line staff members. Theoretical assumptions upon which the program is based are listed in the areas of communication-skills training models, crisis intervention, and suicidal crisis. It is pointed out that the program should not be presented as a complete or comprehensive introduction to suicide. The frame of reference used is that a suicidal gesture is an act of communication. Eight diagrams are included which are to be introduced at various points in the training program. Diagrams one and two present general information about crises, intervention, and different responses to messages. Diagrams three through seven present critical aspects of communication between the potential victim and the helper, important information about the support system of the potential victim, reference to lethality, and the enlistment of aid from others. Diagram eight is to be used during the concluding remarks segment of the program. Two role playing situations are given: (1) each person is given an opportunity to play the caller and then the helper; and (2) one or more persons may role play extensive calls and the group is asked to estimate the lethality of the caller. (EM)

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Suicide Intervention Training Program
for Telephone Hot-line Staffs

Division 17
American Psychological Association
1983 Convention
(2.8.1 depression/suicide)

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Suicide Intervention Training Program
for Telephone Hot-line Staffs
(2.8.1 depression/suicide)

The Suicide Intervention Training Program is designed for presentation to small groups of paraprofessionals or professionals who, in the course of their duties, may be called upon to intervene in some way in suicidal crises. The program was originally designed and is intended primarily for telephone hot-line staffs, although the principles and behaviors which are suggested are appropriate for a variety of settings. Approximately three and one half hours are required in a single session to complete the program.

Theoretical Assumptions. The program is based on the following assumptions about communication-skills training models: (a) such models should be sequential, (b) the sequential steps should be cumulative, (c) the training should involve active repeated practice on the part of the trainees, and (d) immediate feedback on the quality of performance is essential. Assumptions about crisis intervention include: (a) feelings, actions, information about available resources, and the ability to cope are all interrelated, and (b) intervener behaviors must be both focused and active. Assumptions about suicidal crises include: (a) suicidal gestures are communicative acts, (b) significant others are important both in the crisis and in its resolution, and (c) estimations of lethality and appropriate use of community resources should be an integral part of the training program.

Ethical Considerations. The program should not be presented or

interpreted as a complete or comprehensive introduction to the subject, much less as sufficient training to ensure appropriate action in all suicidal crises. The program is offered to various groups with the following considerations in mind: (a) the qualifications of the trainees, (b) emphasis on process, and (c) the assumption that life-threatening situations may require the revealing of confidential information.

Design. The frame of reference used in the program is the view that a suicidal gesture is an act of communication intended most frequently for one or more significant others in response to a problem whose resolution does not seem otherwise possible. Trainees are led through a series of cumulative steps emphasizing both the communication between themselves and the potential victim and the communication of that victim with others in his or her environment. Reference is also made to rough estimates of lethality and to the appropriate use of community resources.

Diagrams. Eight diagrams are introduced at various points in the training program. The actual diagrams, here reproduced in 8½" by 11" format, are drawn on 14" by 17" white poster stock. Lettering is large enough to be readable at 15 feet. Black and red are used for the diagrams and lettering. A chalk board may also be used, to reproduce specific diagrams or to reinforce or clarify specific issues.

Diagrams 1 and 2 present general information about crises, intervention, and differential responses to messages. Diagrams 3 through 7 present, in cumulative fashion, critical aspects of communication between the potential victim and the helper, important information about the support system of the potential victim, and reference to lethality and to enlistment of aid from others. Diagram 8 is used in the concluding-

remarks segment of the program.

Diagram 1 is a schematic representation of the relationships among feelings, available resources, and the amount of awareness of those feelings and resources, in a person experiencing a crisis. In general, as feelings become more intense, resources and/or awareness of resources tend to dwindle, and vice versa. In extreme cases--those of immediate physical danger--appropriate intervention may require immediate action on the part of the helper, regardless of the feelings or complete awareness of the potential victim. The actions of the helper vary, depending on the characteristics of the problem and individual caller, from "just talking" to direct action.

Diagram 2 emphasizes the difference between explicit and implicit messages and between "life" and "death" messages--the latter distinction highlights the ambivalence present in suicidal messages and acts. The importance of investigating possible suicidal messages is stressed, in contrast to the greater latitude which might be appropriate in decisions about which of several non-lethal issues to pursue.

Diagrams 3 through 7 suggest specific aspects of the communication from and to a potential victim. Each diagram, and the accompanying explanation and role-playing, build upon and pre-suppose the presence of the communication aspects which have been identified in prior diagrams.

Diagram 3 emphasizes the ambivalent character of suicidal messages. The taboo quality of the subject is discussed, and suggestions are made about various ways to respond explicitly to both aspects of the ambivalence: for example, "You must be feeling really hurt and discouraged...what's been happening?"

At this point, trainees are informed that they will be doing a number of role-playing situations. Each person will have an opportunity to play the part of a caller and to respond to a caller in a helpful manner, using only the type(s) of responses which have just been explained. In a large group, trainees are sub-divided into smaller groups of six or seven persons each.

The first two volunteers role-play an interchange of two or three responses; the helping person, the "you" of the diagram, is to respond only by acknowledging the ambivalence. After a few interchanges of this type, the helping person retires to the sidelines, the "suicidal" person takes the role of helper, and someone else from the group takes the role of "suicidal" person. This dyad practices a few responses and then the pattern is repeated until everyone in the group has a chance to practice and to observe others practicing the basic responses.

The trainer monitors the responses, interrupting only if the responses are, on the one hand, inappropriate, or, on the other hand, go beyond the defined response-to-ambivalence-behaviors to be practiced. When the dyadic practice is complete, a chance to discuss issues or specific responses is provided. The necessity of repeated response to ambivalent messages, wherever they may occur in a conversation, is again emphasized.

Either at this point or further on in the training program, depending on the expertise of the helpers and the imagination of the "victims," trainees may become frustrated with being restricted to a particular set of responses. They are reassured that the set of responses has been broken down into discrete parts for emphasis but that, in a real situation, more

than one type of response may be appropriate at any given time. The same pattern of group explanation, individual practice, monitoring of trainee behavior, and group discussion is followed for the information presented in diagrams 4 through 7.

Diagram 4 introduces the concept of appropriately supportive statements: for example "I'd like to listen...can you tell me?"

Diagram 5 focuses on the positive aspects of the caller's environment--efforts the caller has made to communicate or cope, and real or potential positive responses or results. :

Diagram 6 defines further the caller's environment, with specific attention to negative responses, especially from significant others. In addition, general indexes of lethality are introduced, including (a) direct questioning--with special reference to the myth that "talking about suicide puts the idea into someone's head"--and (b) information about the suicidal plan, if any--specifically, the duration and complexity of planning, the general level of lethality inherent in the plan, and the availability of means to carry out the plan.

At this point, depending on the size of the group, the time available, the professional background of the group, and the progress of the training thus far, one or more individuals may role play extensive "calls" and the group is then asked to estimate the lethality of the caller. On the other hand, a hypothetical individual may be described--emotional state, presence or lack of significant others, age, sex, suicidal plan, resources available, and so forth.

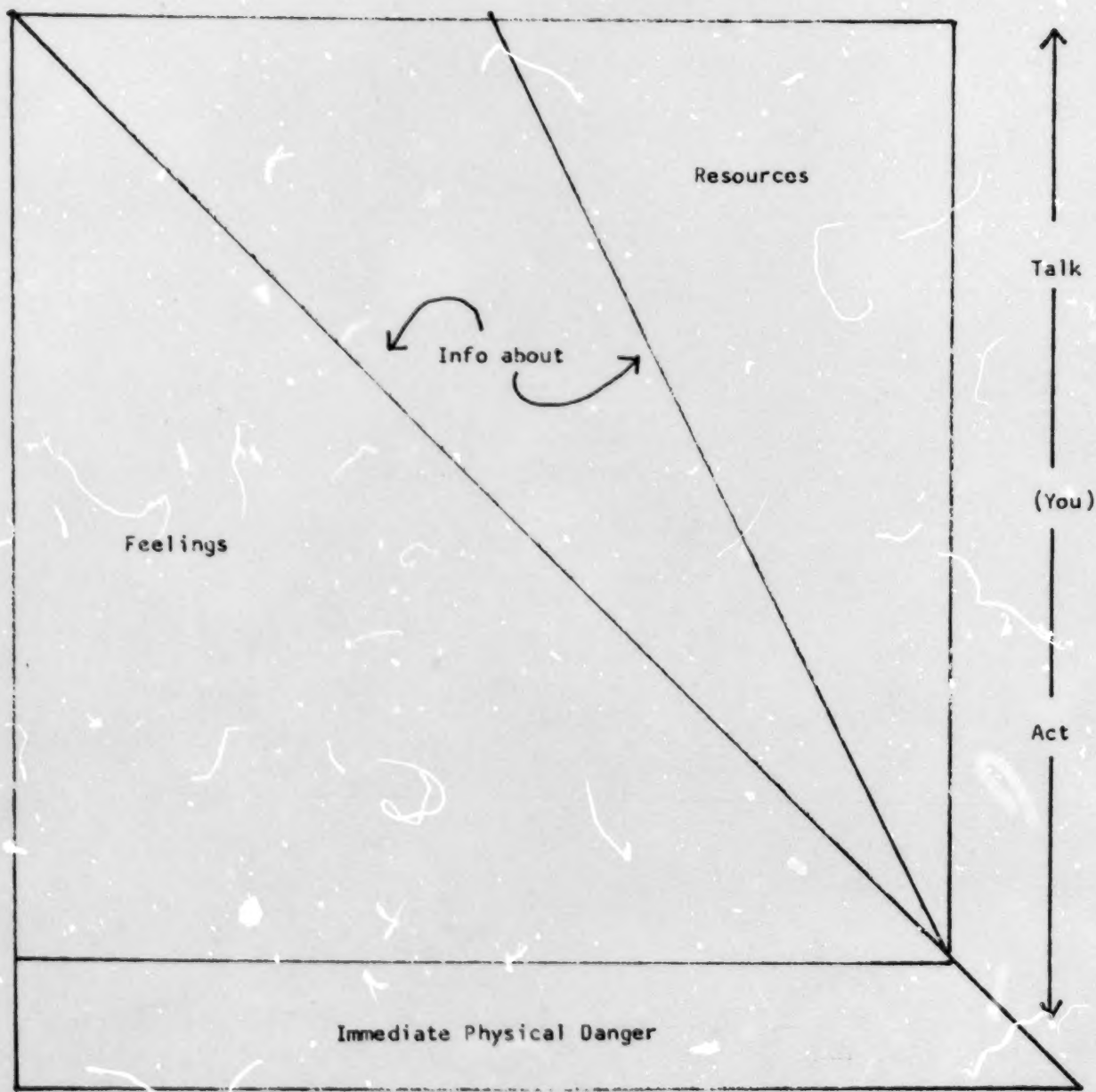
In either case, the trainees are asked to determine individually and without discussion how lethal the individual might be. Trainees are

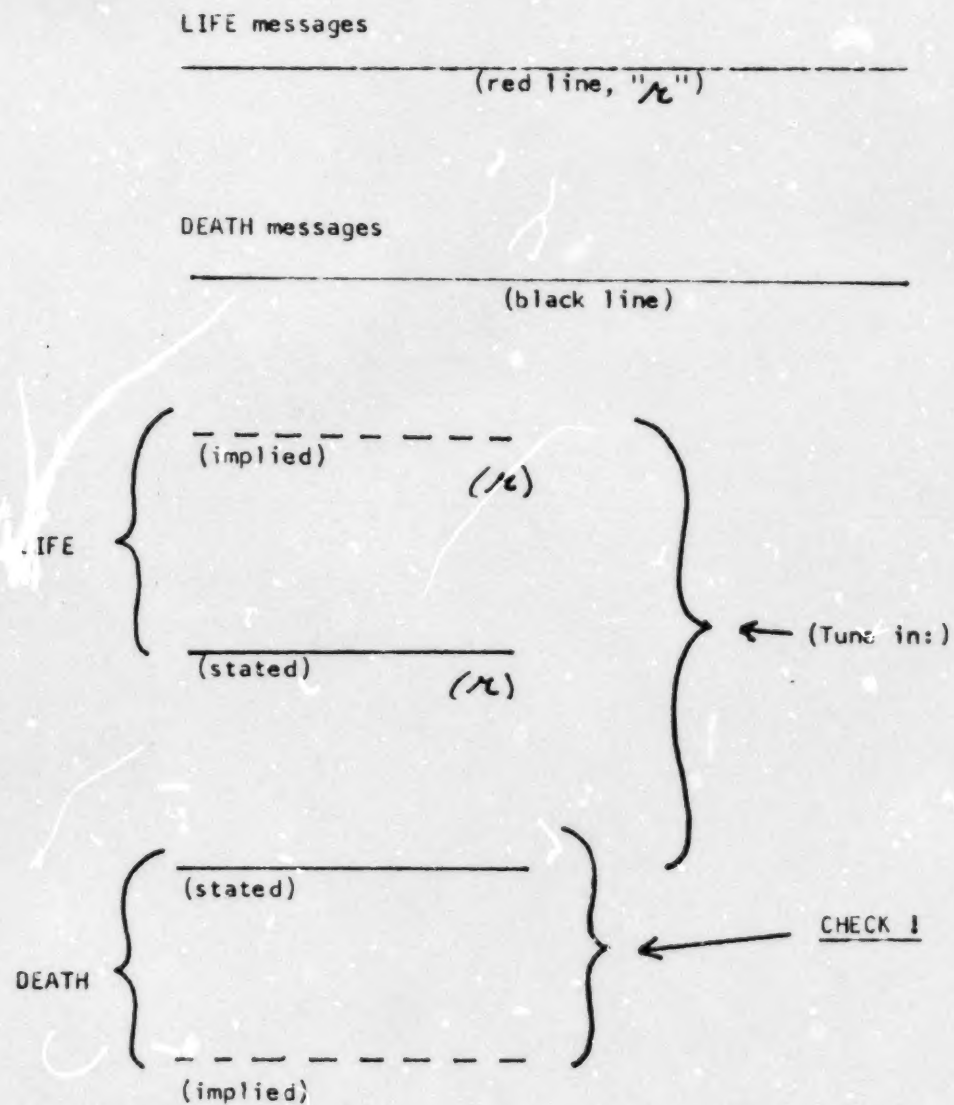
Instructed to use a scale of "1" to "9," in which "9" represents imminent danger of death. Trainees are then asked to state and explain their estimate. At the conclusion of the explanations, the need for matching intervenor behavior with the estimated level of danger is emphasized.

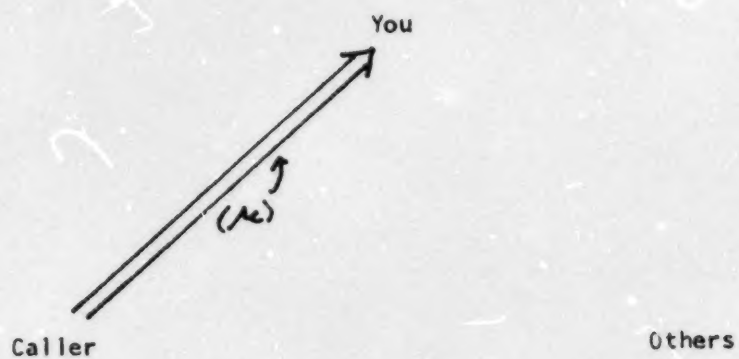
Diagram 7, the last of the cumulative diagrams, presents the complex relationships among lethality, the availability of help from the existing support system, and the need for enlisting aid from others. At this point, depending on the background and work setting of the group being trained, there may be discussion of back-up or referral personnel and agencies, internal agency policy, or information about community resources.

Diagram 8 is presented during the concluding-comments segment of the program. Trainees are encouraged to review their own support systems and to view their work with people in suicidal crises as time-limited. The general goal of crisis intervention--to restore the caller to a former level of adequate functioning--is presented as an achievable goal.

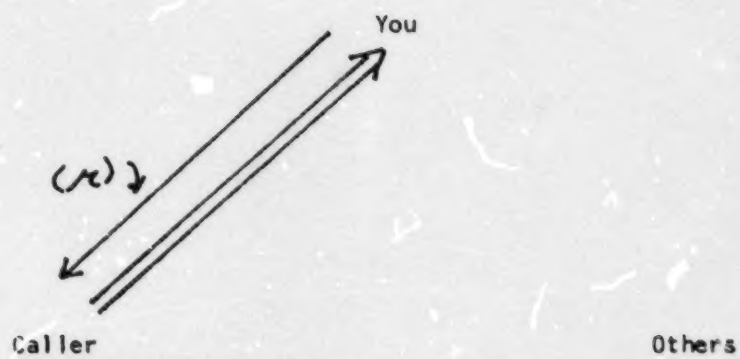
PEOPLE PROBLEMS





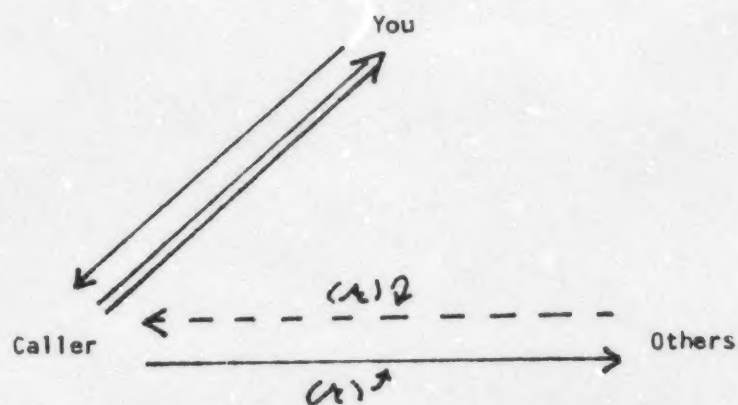


Tune in to ambivalence



Tune in to ambivalence

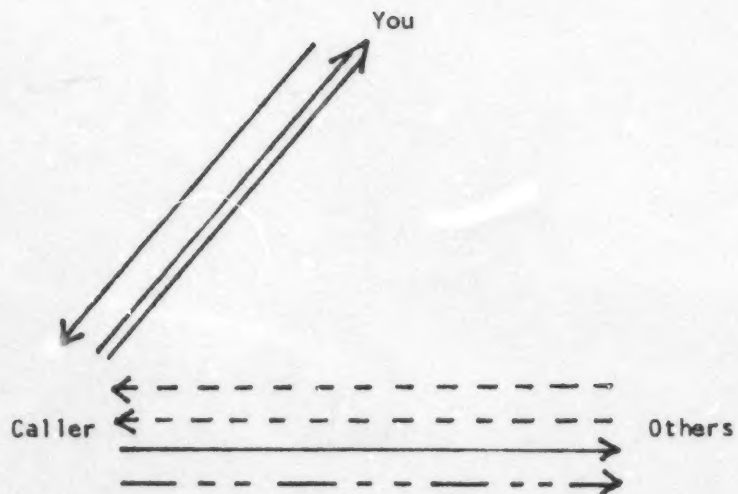
Offer support



Tune in to ambivalence

Offer support

Explore support system



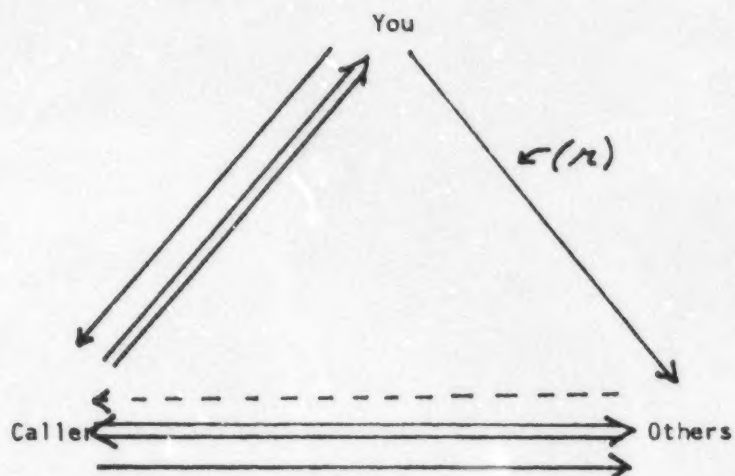
Tune in to ambivalence

Offer support

Explore support system

Check out lethality





Tune in to ambivalence

Offer support

